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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic and linguistic study conducted at a high-technology corporation examined decision-making in managerial meetings, focusing on the effects of silences following a proposal on the maker of the proposal. An opinion is that such silences signify a negative evaluation of the proposal, inviting the proposal maker to alter his position. Observation of meetings took place over 16 months. First, the form and dynamics of decision-making in this context are described, noting that when a negative evaluation of a proposal is given, the group's activity becomes more complex, generally eliciting a "reversal" from one or more participant. A key theme examined here is avoidance of direct disagreement, which the researcher proposes is signified by silence. Silences appeared to carry three meanings in the meetings examined: thought in progress; confusion; and disagreement. Analysis of the activities after silences found that the most common move was a reversal. Other actions included another version of the proposal (made by the original proposal maker), a negative assessment (made by someone else), or metapragmatic comments, when an impasse is evident. Examples from transcripts are offered. Several themes are identified: participants' orientation toward mutual alignment; face and affiliation; and caution. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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Silences Which Elicit Reversals in Business Meetings

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Linguistic Society of America Meeting, January 5, 1996

In contrast to most of the papers at this conference, which investigate spoken utterances, my paper will examine silence. Linguists have most often treated silence as "the ground against which the figure of talk is perceived" (Saville-Troike 1985:xi). This presentation contributes to an alternative perspective in which silence itself is investigated for its potential to convey meaning (Tannen 1990, Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985).

I will argue that in managerial team meetings, silences which follow a proposal signify the negative evaluation of this proposal by other participants. Such silences constitute an invitation to reversal, in the sense that the maker of the proposal is invited to alter her position. I will first situate this argument in the larger project of which it is a part. Next, I will examine the sequences surrounding such silences in detail. Finally, a few ramifications of these findings will be mentioned.

This paper is part of a larger project I am conducting on language and power in corporate America. The study builds on sixteen months of ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork at Motorola, a large high technology corporation based in the Chicago area. Part of this project is an examination of decision-making in managerial meetings. I selected this topic not in order to see how momentous decisions are taken, but rather to study a particularly common managerial activity. In the action-driven world of managers, there is a constant pressure to take decisions (Mintzberg 1973). Most decisions which need to be made, however, are fairly routine, and constructed within relatively narrow parameters. The process of taking a decision can be organized a number of different ways. In the meetings of managerial teams examined here, decisions are made by consensus. This is somewhat unusual in the corporate context; "top-down" decisions are more common.

In the most general terms, decision-making in these meetings occurs when a participant puts forward some proposal for a course of action, and others evaluate the proposal either positively or negatively (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992). When the evaluation is positive, the decision is usually accomplished quickly. The entire sequence often consists simply of the proposal and a few positive assessments, as in example (1).

(1) (M07:467-473)

Bill: How about something on the managers, do- do your, department managers, or do your uh, immediate supervisors, encourage uh
[the RAP award,
Anne: [That's good
Bill: [system
Mary: [That's very good

When a proposal is evaluated negatively, however, the activity becomes more complex. In order for consensus to be achieved, at least one participant must be persuaded to change her opinion. The elicitation of what may be termed "reversals" therefore constitutes the central problematic of negative assessment activities, and it is accomplished through negative assessments. Perhaps the most striking feature of these activities is the large number of immediate reversals. In over half the cases, the maker of a proposal alters her opinion as soon as it is negatively evaluated. The rest of the time, the maker of a proposal contests the negative evaluation, and a longer discussion ensues.

A key theme in the meetings examined here is participants' avoidance of direct disagreement. When participants negatively assess each other's proposals, therefore, their utterances tend to contain high levels of indirectness and mitigation. Although research on politeness and the preference for agreement often treats these phenomena as universal norms, their presence at these meetings is worth noting, for two reasons (Brown & Levinson 1978, Sacks 1987). One reason is that there are many other settings in corporate life where open

disagreement does occur. The preference for agreement in these particular meetings cannot, therefore, be explained simply by reference to general norms. Secondly, the level of indirectness and mitigation in these meetings goes well beyond what American academics would consider normative based on their own experience. Overt disagreement tends to be avoided even on the most trivial matters, as example (2) illustrates.

In this example, meeting participants are discussing how to design survey questions which will be answered on a scale. Anne, the facilitator, asks how many points such scales usually have, suggesting four points as a possibility. It gradually emerges that other participants would prefer a five-point scale. Yet they consistently avoid stating this preference directly, even though it may seem to the reader that the facilitator was not particularly attached to the four-point scale proposal. The discussion continued in this vein well beyond the fragment included here.

(2) (M07:183-197)

Anne:	Like four degrees?
	(1.1)
	How's that usually done.
	(6.9)
Bill:	Yeah, then you don't have, a middle, the- the
	middle
Sue:	Yeah
Lynn:	Yeah
Mary:	Yeah, there's no middle of the roa(hh)d!
Bill:	With four degrees, you're pushing them to either
Anne:	One side or the other?
Bill:	Yeah, you'll still get people putting Xs in the middle though!
	((laughter))

Silences appear to carry three kinds of meaning in the meetings examined. First of all, silences can indicate thought in progress. As Chafe has pointed out, hesitation phenomena may constitute "indications of processing activity which require a certain amount of time" (1985:78). Secondly, silences occasionally appear to express bafflement in the face

of misunderstandings.

Thirdly, silences may convey disagreement. The argument of this paper is that in the meetings examined, silences which follow proposals constitute negative assessments of the proposal. Given the avoidance of overt disagreement just illustrated, this use of silence is unsurprising. As Tannen has pointed out, "silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness" (1985:97).

Conversation analysts have generally treated silence following a proposal as the delay of a stated disagreement (Davidson 1984, Pomerantz 1984, Sacks 1987). Such delays or prefaces minimize the occurrence of stated disagreement by giving the speaker whose utterance is being constructed as problematic an opportunity to modify her stance before the disagreement is made explicit. While I agree with this analysis on a theoretical level, I wish to emphasize that in the meetings examined here, participants attend to silence alone as a negative assessment requiring no further elaboration.

In order to show that meeting participants treat silences which follow proposals as negative assessments which are an invitation to reversal, I will explore what happens after these silences. The most common next move is a reversal from the maker of the proposal. Furthermore, when the next move is something other than a reversal, this move is nonetheless constructed in a way that attends to the unrealized possibility of a reversal in that position. Four kinds of next move are found in my data; each will be described in turn.

The first pattern I will describe is simply the sequence of proposal plus silence plus reversal. Such reversals provide evidence that the maker of the proposal has interpreted the silence as indicating that other participants are finding something problematic with her proposal. Examples (3) and (4) illustrate this pattern.

(3) (M07:159-162)

Carol: How about just something straightforward, do you like the RAP program.
(3.0)
Or is that too scary a question. They'll all be saying no, we'll just close up shop.

(4) (M09:116-118)

Anne: Why don't we
(3.9)
try to decide on an amount.
(5.9)
Or do you want to look at the rest of them too, and get all these amounts together.

In example (3), Carol proposes a question for the survey the team is designing. Her question invites general critique of the program which is the team's raison d'etre. After a silence, Carol withdraws the proposal, providing an interpretation of the silence as having evaluated the question as too risky. Example (4) is quite similar. In this fragment, Anne, the facilitator, proposes that the team decide on the amount of an award. After a silence, she abandons her proposal and puts forward an alternative suggestion instead. This suggestion again reveals an interpretation of the silence as a negative assessment.

Moves other than reversals will now be considered. Sometimes the maker of the proposal is unwilling to abandon her position immediately. Instead of ending the silence with a reversal, she ends it with a subsequent version of her proposal (Davidson 1984). Here again, though, the move displays the speaker's interpretation of the silence as an invitation to abandon her position. Example (5) illustrates this pattern.

(5) (M09:36-40)

Peggy: I think that's the hardest part of this cause it's so subjective, I mean you got people coming in here at five hundred dollars cause they were on a team and, you get somebody else doing something they only, put down a hundred.
(1.4)
It's, I-I mean how can you second guess em.

In this example, Peggy proposes that the team accept the nominator's recommendation regarding the amount of an award. After a silence, she reiterates her argument with a succinct, "how can you second guess em." As Davidson has pointed out, subsequent versions indicate that the speaker is taking a silence "not as lack of understanding, difficulty in hearing, puzzlement, or whatever, but specifically as some sort of doubt about the acceptability of the proposal" (1984:103).

A silence can also be terminated by a speaker other than the maker of the proposal. When this occurs, the speaker usually articulates the negative assessment which had been previously been communicated through silence. Such a stated disagreement reveals the speaker's judgment that the maker of the proposal is not going to utter a reversal without further inducement. Example (6) illustrates this pattern.

(6) (M07:243-248)

Harry: We could ask if they would like to be a member
(3.6)
Anne: Would you like to be considered a new member
(11.6)
I don't know cause I'm thinking
(1.7)
then that sort of gives people the idea that
(1.6)
I don't know

Here Harry suggests that the survey being designed by the team could invite respondents to join the team. It would be quite unusual for a team to open up its membership this way. Harry has not yet been socialized into local practices -- he is both a new employee and new to the United States. After 3.6 seconds of silence without any signs of a reversal, Anne, the facilitator, takes it on herself to turn down his suggestion. (It may be noted that her response illustrates the tendency toward indirectness described earlier.)

Lastly, there are a few cases in my data in which the disagreement expressed by

silence is subsequently neither resolved nor pursued. In these cases, the silence is terminated only by metapragmatic comments about the impasse. Example (7) illustrates this pattern.

(7) (M09:422-425)

Max: Leave his at four, bring theirs down to three?
(2.1)
And bring the other guy up to two fifty.
Peggy: Uhhhh heh hoh hoh hh
(7.0)
Anne: Hhhhh why is this turning out so difficult this morning.

In this example, Max suggests award amounts for three applications which have already been discussed at some length. His proposal is apparently acceptable to no one, since a lengthy silence ensues. Yet he also fails to offer an alternative, probably because it is unclear what an acceptable solution would be. Consequently, the silence is followed merely by a metapragmatic comment from the facilitator. Such comments are quite rare. In general, participants avoid engaging in talk about their talk. They usually keep conflict below the surface as much as possible. Note how heavily euphemized Anne's comment is. This is as close as participants get to talking about disagreement.

In conclusion, I wish to pick out several themes which are evident throughout these examples. One is participants' orientation toward mutual alignment. A pause of seven seconds, as in example (7), can only be achieved through the perfect coordination of all participants, since if even one were to speak, there would be no silence (McDermott and Tylbor 1983). (Here of course the proposer's silence carries a different status from that of the others.) These demonstrations of alignment index meeting participants' disposition toward caution, a disposition which is also revealed in the high levels of politeness phenomena. Elsewhere I discuss this disposition as a response to a subtle yet pervasive form of organizational control (Wasson 1995, 1996).

Secondly, themes of face and affiliation are evident in these materials. In the corporate world, face is closely tied to an ability to display the "right" opinion in front stage contexts (Goffman 1967). To negatively evaluate someone's proposal is therefore more of a face threatening act among managers than it is among, for instance, academics. Participants' extensive efforts to mitigate their negative evaluations, and to facilitate one another's reversals, may thus be read as gestures of good will towards one another. Indeed, while on one level these meetings are about making decisions, on another they are about building relationships.

Finally, the cautiousness which is evident throughout these examples stands in contrast to depictions of managerial interactions as consistently direct and confrontational. Such depictions are found in studies ranging from comparisons of Japanese and American business styles, to language and gender studies which accept male managers' stories glorifying conflict as an accurate reflection of daily practice. Because managers often prefer to think of themselves as confrontational, they tend to deemphasize the pervasiveness of caution in their daily encounters. My findings thus reiterate the importance of examining not only linguistic ideologies, but also linguistic practices.

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